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# **On Sacred Ground: The Political Performance of Religious Responsibility**

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*April 2012:* In Dambulla, a bustling market town built around a crossroads on the northern cusp of Sri Lanka's central province, a mosque was attacked by a procession of protestors led by the chief priest of the nearby Buddhist temple. Ostensibly the protest was against the presence of the mosque on the grounds that it had been built in an exclusively Buddhist 'sacred area'. Beginning with an empirical account of the attack on the Dambulla mosque this paper argues that the preservation of what is deemed to be 'sacred' in Sri Lanka provides an effective idiom through which certain religious figures can intelligibly articulate political claims whilst maintaining critical distance from the dirty world of 'Politics'. Corollary to this, and drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Dambulla, the paper explores the various different meanings of politics locally: highlighting the interplay of everyday politicking and high-profile political performance.

## **Introduction**

The attack on the Dambulla mosque in April 2012 required the intervention of the army to quell and consequently gained - for a short period of time - national and even international media coverage. The event provided a headline-grabbing example of what seems to be a recent surge of ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka. The Dambulla mosque attack has become emblematic of a phenomenon in post-war Sri Lanka, in which attacks on religious sites have come to the forefront of public attention (CPA 2013). The start of 2013 has seen an increase in the public propagation of anti-Muslim sentiment from Buddhists in Sri Lanka in a way that was not seen throughout the war. Rallies and marches have been organised to intimidate Muslim business owners, anti-Muslim pamphlets have been widely distributed and social media has also been used to mobilise anti-Muslim movements.<sup>1</sup>

This paper zooms in from the national scene, where public commentary has been largely dominated by journalists, and presents an analysis of the attack on the Dambulla mosque drawing from the author's experience at the protest and from living in the town for over a year prior to the event. The first half of the paper is dedicated to providing a detailed account of what happened on the day the Dambulla mosque was attacked and how things played out in the days that followed. The second half will focus on the protagonist of the protest, the chief priest of the local Buddhist temple.

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At a theoretical level, the paper examines the local understanding of ‘politics’ and ‘politicking’ in Dambulla and provides new ethnographic insights into the complex relationship between religion and politics in Sri Lanka.

Although the mosque sits at the centre of the ethnographic action, this paper is not positioned within existing scholarship on Muslim identity formation (see, Haniffa 2008; Thiranagama 2012), or a broader history of Muslim persecution in Sri Lanka (see, Samaraweera 1979; Roberts 1981; Ismail 1985; Haniffa 2007), or even Muslim politics and minority rights in Sri Lanka (Haniffa 2009, 2013). Instead, the paper sits between and builds upon two different canons in the anthropology of Sri Lanka: that of political-Buddhism (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988, Kemper 1991, Tambiah 1992, Scott 1994 Seneviratne 1999, and Abeysekera 2002) and the anthropology of politics and nationalism (Tennekoon 1988, 1990; Spencer 1990, 2007; Brow 1996; Gunawardana 1990; Woost 1990, 1993; De Alwis 1996, 1998; Jaganathan & Ismail 2009; Amarasuriya 2010).<sup>2</sup> Recent contributions to understanding further the relationship between politics and religion in Sri Lanka have been made from the field of Political Geography (Goodhand, Klem, Korf 2009, Klem 2011, Johnson 2012). These explore the capacity of religious institutions and figures to operate in political arenas and will also be discussed within. For now though, let us return to April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012.

### Account of Events

Purely by chance, Chula and I drank tea in a stall by the junction near the entrance to the Dambulla Golden Temple on the day of the protest. From where we sat we could see the fifty-foot high Golden Buddha statue that had been built under the auspices of the temple’s chief priest (*māha nāyaka*), the Venerable Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala Thero (henceforth Sumangala). The enormous golden structure sits at the bottom of the Dambulla rock and dominates the entrance to the Dambulla Cave Temple. The Cave Temple at the top of the rock and the Golden Temple at the bottom are two separate institutions but resided over by the same chief priest – Sumangala.<sup>3</sup> Also situated at the bottom of the rock is Sumangala’s media business, ‘The Rangiri Dambulu Media Network’, which runs a newspaper, a radio station, and soon a television station.<sup>4</sup>

A government bus carrying soldiers parked on the road outside the tea stall; perhaps alerted by the local minister after a ‘fire-bomb’ had been thrown at the mosque the night before the protest. The soldiers started to position themselves around the junction and the entrance to the mosque, which had been decorated in multi-coloured Buddhist flags. Beneath the multi-coloured flags that hung limply in the warm morning air, gathered men in crisp white shirts. The white shirt is considered proper attire both for visiting a Buddhist temple and holding political office in Sri Lanka. In much the same way, Dipesh Chakrabarty writing on clothing the ‘political man’ in India notes that the white *Khadi*, popularized by Gandhi in the 1920s, represents ‘the Hindu idea of purity (without blemish, pollution)’ (Chakrabarty 2001:27), thus collapsing a political message of renouncing wealth, putting the nation first and being pure of corruption, with Hindu religious piety. In the tea stall by the temple, political righteousness and religious virtue were threaded together in the white shirts worn by the protestors; forming a visual display of Clifford Geertz’ assertion that ‘The gravity of high politics and the solemnity of high worship’ are analogous (Geertz, 1983:124).

Towards the temple the police were stationing themselves at intervals along the roadside where groups of people were meeting before making their way up to the temple for the rally.

At the temple Sumangala told a large crowd that Muslim terrorists (*Mussal Waroo Trusthawāthi*) are wiping out the Buddhist heritage in the whole of Asia.<sup>5</sup> The crowd, which comprised of people from Dambulla and beyond (mainly farmers but also some businessmen from the town) had been gathered to protest the presence of a mosque that had been ‘illegally’ developed in an apparently exclusively Buddhist ‘sacred area’ referred to as, *Pūja Bhūmiya*. When Sumangala finished his caustic diatribe against Muslims in Dambulla, Sri Lanka, Asia, and the world, he led the march to the mosque. The tone set by Sumangala in his opening address was continued by the protestors as they proceeded down the road chanting, “*may Sinhala, apigay ratay*” – this is the country of us Sinhala people.<sup>6</sup>

Dambulla is a trading hub for vegetables with a population of approximately 70,000 people. Muslims account for less than ten percent of the population in Dambulla, which is, by a large majority, predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist. Most Muslims working in Dambulla commute in to do so from surrounding towns like Naula, Matale and Galewela, and many run lucrative stalls in the wholesale vegetable market. The mosque itself is situated roughly three hundred meters away from the Buddhist temple, down the main road towards the town. It is about fifteen meters in length and in height does not protrude above the dilapidated houses that shield it from the main road. It has no minarets or domes, or other typical features of Islamic architecture. There are a few taps outside, one tank for ablutions before worship and a main prayer room. The mosque was built on private land in 1962 and later extended in 1997.<sup>7</sup> Relocating the mosque had been under discussion with the Mosque Committee and the local government authority - relatively amicably I was told - for some time before the protest took place. Despite its longevity in Dambulla it has the appearance of a temporary structure, constructed as it is, out of green corrugated sheet metal. The main entrance is down a narrow alleyway from the main road, where it is blocked off from the street behind a metal door.

It was at this metal door that connects the mosque to the main road down which the procession arrived, that the crowds were forced to stop. The bottleneck in the procession meant that the road quickly filled with people who chanted and cheered as the door to the mosque was being smashed. Eventually, after a fairly lackluster attempt by the police to stop protesters, the door was forced open and the soldiers who were in position behind the door stemmed the flow of people getting through. The soldiers negotiated with the monks, letting several of them in but denying other protesters entry. Whilst civilian protestors were stopped at the main entrance to the mosque, another side entrance was soon discovered through a garden that had open access from the road. The crowd cheered and piled in but were soon halted by the army, at which point they began to throw rocks towards the mosque before realizing they might hit one of the monks who were closer to it. The protest itself was actually very well managed once the army took control. The monks were able to inspect the mosque and the soldiers kept away those who might have damaged it; meanwhile, the media were able to capture most of what unfolded inside and outside. Ironically, the actual location of the mosque, which had caused so much uproar, was little known by those protestors seemingly most upset by it. Due to the fact that only certain people

could make it through the army cordon around the mosque, many men and women gathered on the road outside.

Women from the temple dressed immaculately in white sat modestly on the road, embodying the calm presence of the 'Moral Mother' of Sinhalese folk-law, *Vihara Maha Devi*, who's 'call to arms is one of patriotism and not violence' (De Alwis 1998:260). Next to the composed women in white lay a man exhausted and emotional with over-excitement. The army had not let him follow the monks through to the mosque and he had worn his voice down to a thin rasp, declaring to those on the road how his blood ran for the country. In contrast to the excitement that had built up outside the army cordon around the mosque where chanting, crying, rock throwing, and lying on the road ensued; scenes closer to the mosque were remarkably controlled and calm. I watched as my friends and neighbours made various attempts to get past the army line to destroy the mosque.

Sensing the situation was getting increasingly heated, and having received veiled threats myself, I decided it would be smart to find a friend. I spotted Anil and decided he would be a decent protestor to align myself with as he too was trying to keep a fairly low profile. When I arrived in Dambulla, Anil was competing for a place on the Urban Council (Nagara Sabha), which he successfully obtained. He was the only government figure at the protest until the Pradeshiya Lekum (Divisional Secretary) turned up later to speak to some of the members of the Mosque Committee.<sup>8</sup> On the day of the protest the government, and in particular the local minister, was being held responsible for not protecting Buddhism, the Sinhala race, or the Sinhala nation. Sumangala claimed that the local minister was directly responsible for the construction of this mosque and the affluence of Muslims in Dambulla. It is also strongly believed that Muslim votes in Dambulla go to the current minister. As a politician, Anil was placed very much as part of the problem at the protest. Together Anil and I shifted around the outskirts of the protest when it got heated, but eventually I decided upon a change of vantage point completely and in doing so witnessed a different scene play out.

### **Pādeniya interlude: the showdown at the kovil**

Opposite the mosque, just across the main road that runs from the Dambulla temple to the town is a small cluster of houses - much like a hamlet - collectively referred to as Pādeniya. Here, a slightly different dimension to the protest began to unfold. Sumangala, with a contingent of followers including several police officers, broke away from the main group at the front of the mosque and made his way to the Hindu temple (referred to henceforth as a kovil - the Tamil word for temple) in the centre of Pādeniya. A young woman approached Sumangala and tried to explain that there have been people living in this hamlet for decades, that it was the temple that had allowed them to stay on the land initially, and that the people of Pādeniya worship at and give Pujawa (act of worship or offering, referred to henceforth as puja) to the Dambulla temple. Sumangala was not interested in her claims and despite her humble and diplomatic approach - referring to the monk respectfully and intimately as apē hamaduru (our monk) - she was offensively dismissed.<sup>910</sup> Sumangala demanded the removal of the kovil and of all the houses from around the base of the temple before departing.

As he was leaving Pādeniya with his entourage a young man standing on the edge of the kovil shouted antagonistically at the group, expressing his displeasure with what had transpired. This parting shot met with quick response from a man in Sumangala's company. The two men then began to shout at one another aggressively and very quickly the issue developed from one concerning a mosque and a kovil on exclusively Buddhist 'sacred ground' and found - sadly familiar - expression in the discourse of ethnic identity. The man with Sumangala called the villager defending the kovil a Tamil in a derogatory manner. The man from Pādeniya, who was standing on the edge of the kovil, clearly angry and distressed, passionately and definitively screamed his response, "*mama Sinhala!*" – I am Sinhala! This short scene requires some further context.

Pādeniya is somewhat hidden from sight behind a row of fairly run down shops clustered together along the main road from the temple to the town selling pots, pans and plastic chairs. It was in the shaded crevices of these shops that the Pādeniya residents, who are mostly Hindu Tamils, stood and watched the protest unfold outside the mosque before Sumangala's project of purifying the 'sacred area' around the Dambulla temple turned its attention to their own kovil. Most of the marriages in Pādeniya are between Tamil men from Pādeniya and Tamil women from Matale but there are several mixed marriages between Sinhalese men and Tamil women. Although there were only four that I was aware of, I was repeatedly told that such mixed marriages were common here. As a result of this frequent occurrence of Sinhala-Tamil mixed marriages, many of the younger generation in Pādeniya, such as the man confronting Sumangala from the edge of the kovil, refer to themselves as Sinhalese. Additionally, many of the younger generation in Pādeniya don't actually speak Tamil. Although some claimed to, they were often promptly rebuked (in Sinhala) by their elders and told not to tell lies.

Pādeniya is ostensibly a 'Tamil village'. With the exception of several mixed Sinhala-Tamil marriages and the children begot from these marriages, all other inhabitants are Tamil, and there is a kovil with a shrine to Murugan (the Hindu god of war) in the centre of the village. There is an impressive kovil festival that takes place over three days every August, which sends a large procession of Pādeniya residents suspended from hooks buried in their skin through the centre of Dambulla town in a practice called *thuukkukkaavadi* (in Tamil) associated with the Hindu god Murugan.<sup>11</sup> However, some of the inhabitants of this seemingly Tamil village are Sinhalese Buddhists with a Tamil mother. Others are Tamil but attended the Buddhist Temple Montessori as children and later studied at the Sinhala medium government school; they do not speak Tamil as their first language, they give puja at the Buddhist temple and, although they do celebrate Tamil festivals, they participate in the Dambulla Perahera, organised by the Buddhist Temple.<sup>12</sup> Although only a fragment of a much more complex picture, it is in this social *mélange* that a man who identifies himself as a Sinhalese Buddhist defended a kovil in a Tamil village in front of a powerful Buddhist priest.

### **Back over the road**

Inside the mosque during the protest were prominent members of the Mosque Committee, including a member of the Provincial Council, and several wealthy

traders from the Dambulla vegetable market. Whilst the Mosque Committee were ushered out of one side of the building, the protestors gathered on the other, charging at the army, throwing rocks at the mosque and performing the Buddhist chant, *Sādu-Sādu-Sādu*.<sup>13</sup> The army kept the crowds away from the mosque itself whilst the District Inspector General (D.I.G) and Sumangala ceremoniously sealed the door to the mosque closed. The protest had been a success and Sumangala said as much in his closing address to the crowd after they followed him back up the road to the Dambulla temple. The protest ended with the declaration that there would be a meeting in three days time between the government and the Mosque Committee in which they must organise the relocation of the mosque. In the mean time, Sumangala told the crowd to boycott Muslim shops.

The interested parties in Dambulla, the Dambulla Mosque Committee, Sumangala and the temple, and the local government had done what they could for the time being. The Mosque Committee had gone through their various political connections; from Provincial Councillors to Cabinet Ministers, in order to leverage influence on higher planes within the government. Muslim ministers did not want to speak to anyone other than the President himself.<sup>14</sup> Sumangala and the divisional-level state bureaucracy could also only wait for the response of the national government. Whilst waiting for news from the highest reaches of government, which did not come quickly as the President was away on a tour of South Korea, what occurred in Dambulla was a state of political paralysis. Whereby, the established institutional hierarchies of power in Sri Lanka's political architecture, to which the Mosque Committee and the local government would ordinarily reach out to, lacked the capacity to respond coherently to appeals.

In the President's absence the government response was a confused one, the Prime Minister demanded the mosque be removed whilst the local minister (who is also the Lands Minister) publicly condemned the monk and supported the Mosque Committee. Minister A.H.M Fowzie ceremoniously reopened the door to the Dambulla mosque previously sealed by Sumangala and the D.I.G, and the National Physical Planning Department of the Ministry of Urban Development and Sacred Area Development, sent two representatives to tell the Pādeniya residents that their houses were to be flattened to make way for the proposed Dambulla temple car park.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the Urban Development Authority issued letters to a number of shops and households in the area claiming that they had to move as their property was on 'sacred ground' – a claim to land later shown to have no provision in the existing legal framework of Sri Lanka (CPA 2012:07). Local government and the Mosque committee could not act until further news from the national government, but similarly, government ministers could not establish a political solution until the President arrived. Thus politicians, local government authorities, and ministerial departments could only perform gestures of managing the affair until the President returned. For the Muslims who attend the Dambulla mosque, the residents of Pādeniya, and Sumangala's crowd, everyday business resumed.

Whilst Dambulla drew breath in paralysis, people in other parts of the country protested the closure of the mosque, which had gained a large degree of media attention over the previous week. Two days after the meeting at the Dambulla Provincial Council offices, there were 'hartals' (enforced closure of shops and businesses in protest) in the heavily Muslim-populated areas in the East of the

country.<sup>16</sup> The central Colombo mosque also held a rally in support of the Dambulla mosque. The Colombo Telegraph talked of a ‘prevailing crisis’ and there was a military presence in Ampara as Muslims set fire to tyres in the road in protest.<sup>17</sup> Mirroring the events on the day, in which scenes from inside the mosque were calm and those on the periphery chaotic, Dambulla was now composed whilst the outside world appeared to be descending into ‘crisis’.

When a national-level discourse developed around the Dambulla mosque incident, it transformed the local management of the issue itself. A Muslim vegetable trader made this clear to me when he told me that the relocation of the mosque had previously been under discussion with the Divisional Secretary before Sumangala carried out the protest. However, the trader claimed, because of the way the protest had been conducted, the Muslims will never move the mosque now. The propensity for a public event, such as a protest or riot, to transcend the local context in which it was conceived and take on new kinds of meaning, is a process that has been well documented in South Asia (Brass 1997; Das 1995, 1996; Tambiah 1996). In the national press, the mosque protest had been sewn into a historicity of Muslim persecution and Sinhala chauvinism, and had come to be narrated by groups of actors operating within different political spheres. Following Sumangala’s protest, relocating the mosque became a very different issue extracted from its local management, embroiled in an on-going national-level conversation concerning minority politics, and made emblematic of a broader swathe of attacks on religious sites in Sri Lanka since the end of the war in 2009 (CPA 2013). Despite the so called ‘prevailing crisis’ of 2012 exemplified by the protest at the Dambulla mosque, both the mosque and the kovil are still standing and still very much in use today (June 2013). The kovil is attended by the residents of Pādeniya and by several people in Dambulla who had been present at the protest against the mosque. The houses around the kovil are also still standing.

### **Sacred Politics**

The attack on the Dambulla mosque and the Pādeniya kovil was couched in terms of protecting a ‘sacred area’. The term ‘sacred area’ gained credence at the turn of the twentieth century, when revivalist and social reformer Walisinghe Harischandra succeeded in annexing substantial amounts of land in Anurādhapura, a larger city to the north of Dambulla, to be exclusively preserved as Buddhist ‘sacred’ sites (Kemper, 1991: 142). Constructing the ‘sacred area’ in Anurādhapura involved removing churches, kovils, and administrative buildings.<sup>18</sup> Harischandra’s success in Anurādhapura imposed a ‘distinctive language of argument on religious affairs’ (ibid: 143), in which demarcating a ‘sacred area’ (*Pūja Bhūmiya*) gained gravitas, not only as a technique of ethno-religious purification - the separation of Sinhala-Buddhist (sacred) sites from the mundane world of government offices and the removal of all other religious buildings and non-Buddhists - but importantly, as a performance of religious responsibility that is inseparable from the domain of ‘the political’ in Sri Lanka. The act of demarcating and protecting ‘sacred areas’ is thus an idiom through which political claims can be articulated intelligibly and effectively in Sri Lanka.

The act of protecting or renovating a sacred area in pre-colonial Lanka was celebrated in the *Mahāvamsa* – the so called ‘ancient chronicles’ of Sri Lanka - as an act first and foremost of religious responsibility. In the twentieth century, the protection of



sacred sites found traction in the rhetoric of politicians and Buddhist activists (ibid: 23). The best example of this can be seen in state-led development projects, such as the Mahaveli Irrigation Project of the 1960s and later the 'Accelerated' Mahaveli scheme of 1978. Politicians framed these national development projects as the reincarnation of an ancient, indigenous, Sinhalese-Buddhist national culture, moreover, reclaiming a Sinhala-Buddhist space, the *Rajarata* - the northern kingdom (Tennekoon, 1988, 1990; Woost, 1990, 1993, 1997). According to Abeysekera (2002: 187), Dambulla became developed as a 'sacred' site explicitly *as* a political project in 1979 when the United National Party (UNP) government designated it as such during an archaeological excavation project undertaken to raise Dambulla's profile as a centre of pilgrimage.

Preserving a 'sacred area' in Sri Lanka is at once performing a religious responsibility and inescapably at the same time, the pursuit of a Buddhist-political project. Similarly, an attack on Tamils and Muslims - as occurred in Pādeniya - is inescapably political. Interethnic relations, as Paul Brass asserts, 'have become such a pervasive concern in contemporary societies that the interpretation of virtually any act of violence between persons identified as belonging to different ethnic groups itself becomes a political act' (Brass, 1997: 04). However, when Sumangala rallied the protesters together and ordered the removal of the mosque and the kovil on the grounds that they were built in an exclusively Buddhist 'sacred area', he claimed simply to be fulfilling a religious responsibility.

By the middle of the twentieth century Sri Lankan politicians proved acutely aware of the importance of infusing political projects of national infrastructure development with the development of Sinhala culture and Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Tennekoon 1988, 1990; Woost 1990, 1993, 1997; Van der Horst 1995). Conversely, Sumangala understands the importance of renouncing anything explicitly 'political' in his projects which he places firmly in the realm of religious responsibility and the 'spiritual development' of the country, this is a responsibility exclusively reserved for the monastic community (*Sangha*) in Sri Lanka (Abeysekera 2002). As he explained it to me:

'According to my opinion, development means physical and spiritual. Accordingly, development of Dambulla should be taken up. Physical development is looked after by the government and spiritual development is under the temple. But Dambulla temple is always to the welfare of both the above. Presently, both these could not be achieved due to political interference' (interview with Sumangala June 2012).

Sumangala expresses a clear distinction between: the mundane obligation of physical development which is undertaken by the government; the spiritual development of Dambulla which is undertaken by the temple; and 'political interference'. By 'physical development' Sumangala refers to the flow of material resources from the state to the town; and by 'spiritual development', he refers to the importance of making sure such material change befits a specifically Sinhala-Buddhist model for Sri Lankan society - the principle producers and distributors of this Sinhala-Buddhist model for society, of course, are the *Sangha* and at a local level the temple itself. By 'political interference', Sumangala refers to a situation in which local party politics

disrupts the flow of materials from the state to society causing disunity within the town. A good example of such 'political interference' can be found in the 'Village Awakening' (Gam Udawa) development scheme famously undertaken by the UNP in the late 1970s as documented by Brow (1996), which constructed a number of new houses largely in the **North-Central Province**. In so doing, electoral party politics created fissures and disunity in village life, making which political party one supported the central determinate of what material resources one could attain (ibid).

Sumangala does not express his commitment to welfare as anything inherently 'political'. This he explained to me quite definitely: 'I do not much concern myself in politics when working for the welfare of society'. Any interest the temple may have in the physical development of Dambulla is presented as an apolitical interest in the general 'welfare' of the people and moreover, to ensure that whatever developments occur correspond with the ideals of Sinhala-Buddhist (peasant) society (see Moore 1989:190/191, 1985). Sumangala thus frames his religious responsibilities in terms of, 'spiritual development' and 'welfare'; in so doing he creates for himself room to maneuver when operating in the inescapably political sphere of national development, and the flow of material resources from the state to the town. By staking the claim to a 'sacred area' and evoking the language of religious responsibility for the development of the town, Sumangala has carved out an effective way to wade in the murky waters of 'the political'.

Goodhand, Klem, and Korf (2009) illustrate similar strategies utilised by religious actors and organisations operating in complex political environments in the east of Sri Lanka.<sup>19</sup> Religious figures in the east, according to Goodhand *et al*, employ particular discursive strategies such as 'neutrality and non-partisanship' to appear apolitical (Goodhand *et al* 2009:693). Parallel examples of religious figures maneuvering around politically enforced boundaries - to undertake humanitarian work - in the north of Sri Lanka have also been documented by Johnson (2012). According to Johnson, Catholic Priests drew on 'aesthetic' and 'moral' capital to facilitate their passage across political borders (ibid 2012:84). Consistent within the detailed examples presented by Goodhand *et al* (2009) and Johnson (2012) is the necessity to avoid 'the political' in what they do, couching their work instead in terms of 'neutrality' and 'non-partisanship', and drawing on the moral aesthetics of their position within religious institutions. Implicit within this *modus operandi* is the notion of a boundary - although improbable, porous, imagined, or 'relational' - between 'politics' and 'religion'. Here we have distinctly religious figures navigating their way through distinctly political arenas.

In the preservation of a 'sacred area', the boundaries between religion and politics are on the one hand implied: Sumangala claims that what he is doing is *not* political, thus 'politics' we assume must lie elsewhere. On the other hand, distinction between politics and religion is collapsed, as the preservation of a Buddhist sacred site is a project that maps neatly on to the Sinhalese-nationalist political vision for the country. Sumangala is not the first Buddhist monk to center himself in a political situation and claim to speak from a place outside the dirty world of politics. This process, as identified by a number of authors (Seneviratne 1999; Abeysekera 2002; Deegalle 2004; Spencer 2012), has been evident since the 1940s and has transformed from young monks accompanying political rallies in the early 1980s to the entrance of monks into Parliament in 2004 representing the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), an

ultra-nationalist party formed in the wake of the death of a prominent monk in 2003 (see, Deegalle 2004). The Muslim and Catholic organisations that navigate their activities through political arenas in the north and east do not possess the same powerful vocabulary of ‘religious responsibility’ that resonates within the Sinhalese-Buddhist political imaginary. Whilst Christian and Muslim institutions lack the capacity to transgress the boundaries of ‘the political’ in Sri Lanka (Goodhand *et al* 2009, Johnson 2012, Spencer 2012), an influential monk such as Sumangala can harness the moral authority of the Sangha to engage the world of mass politics in Sri Lanka: transposing religious responsibilities on to political projects.

### **Sumangala and recognising politics**

The Dambulla mosque protest was not the first time Sumangala has been at the centre of a social and political drama in which he has transposed a relatively localised set of issues on to the national stage.<sup>20</sup> In 1992, he conducted a protest against the construction of a five-star hotel in a near by village. The hotel protest garnered national media attention and rallied together politicians of various parties, as well as religious leaders of various faiths, against the government of the day. In the hotel protest Sumangala was (again) central to a highly politicized public event yet presented his involvement as removed entirely from the realm of politics. However, for such a reputedly ‘political monk’, Sumangala had been curiously absent from all of the seemingly political events that had hitherto unfolded in my field site: protests, elections, and protesting election results. These were dominated for the most part by merchants, local government authorities, and political party candidates. Before the mosque protest, Sumangala had not been visibly involved in politics throughout my time in Dambulla. This, of course, depends on how one defines and recognizes ‘politics’.

The conventional notion of electoral politics - campaigns to run for a government office, political parties, fireworks, flags and impassioned speeches - holds a prominent place in Sri Lankan social life, and the public performance of *doing* politics is often recognisable. The way the local mayor gives a speech about his contribution to the town at the opening of a village ceremony, the way he dresses, the way he is deferentially addressed by the villagers themselves, and the way a popular electoral candidate enters the town to an explosion of firecrackers; these are all recognised performances of ‘doing politics’. On the other hand there are instances where ‘political’ performance is not so straight forward to recognise and locate, for example, when men dance around in their underpants, hang off sign boards and impersonate demons (Spencer, 1990).

Never-the-less, politics in Dambulla has a culturally recognizable and replicable public character. Politics is associated with Government - the bureaucratic offices of the state competition for the resources such offices can extol, and competition for the public office itself - and simultaneously associated with a particular way of behaving. How recognisable this way of behaving is, became apparent in the school hall of the Dambulla National College whilst watching a production of Ravindra Ariyaratna’s famous Sinhala play *Balloth Ekka Baa* (‘Can’t Go With Dogs’) performed by the Dambulla Town Welfare Society, when the audience fell apart in raucous laughter at the impersonations of politicians and their entourages. At another level, politics can be seen in terms of politicking: leveraging influence through networks, connections,

favours, and patronage. There is an important interplay between the public performances of politics as it is conventionally understood - harnessing the various resources of the state - and the networks of influence and leverage that get things done at a local level - the micro-politics of everyday life. Throughout my fieldwork in Dambulla, the interplay between politics and politicking came to the surface in the context of a spectacle such as a protest. Such an event enables the public performance of authority and displaying ones political influence, at the same time, constructing the public event itself and gathering crowds requires pulling local alliances into order.

Political influence can be seen to work here on two registers: i) influence in the official world of government politics; and ii) everyday politics, which is the ability to influence people in Dambulla. Sumangala has demonstrated the former through run-ins with various Cabinet Ministers and Presidents over the years; this is political influence with a capital 'P'. The most well known, and well documented, example of Sumangala's influence penetrating the highest levels of government was the aforementioned hotel protest of the early 1990s which even defied President Premadasa for a short period of time (Seneviratne 1999). There is a general impression among Dambulla residents that Sumangala has access to the highest reaches of government, and furthermore that he is a figure around whom politicians and aspiring politicians must maneuver carefully.

Whilst defying a President on the national stage could be recognized as the high profile end of Sumangala's political influence, the less high profile work of politics concerns the consolidation and affirmation of power at the local level. This refers to Sumangala's ability to hold sway and influence in peoples everyday lives. This is politics with a lower case 'p'. The micro-politics of everyday life, as I found it to be in Dambulla throughout my fieldwork, is about having the authority or a good connection to an authority that can allow or deny something to happen. This version of everyday-politics arranges a school transfer, accesses a reputable doctor, or gets a family member a job. Everyday-politics relies on maintaining a network of connections and associates who can offer support. Political influence in Dambulla, with a lower case 'p', boils down to the ability to get something done. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Dambulla is awash with organisations and associations that extend the networks and the influence of their individual members.

The importance of associations and societies in local level politicking has not been overlooked by Sumangala who is the founder of the monks union (*Sangha Sabhā*) comprised of 170 monks from various temples in and around Dambulla which managed to break away from the dominant Kandy based Asgiriya chapter in the early 1990s and formed a new sub sect of the Siyam Nikāya called the, *Rangiri Dambulu Sangha Sabhāva* (The Sangha Assembly of the Golden Rock of Dambulla) (see Abeysekera 2002 & Seneviratne 1999). He is also the primary 'sponsor' (*anushāsaka*) of almost all of the various unions, societies and associations in Dambulla known as *samitiya*. Such *samitiya* span farmer's societies (*govi samitiya*), trader's unions such as the 'Golden Dambulla Sinhala Traders Foundation' (*Rangiri Dambulla Sinhala Velenda Padathma*), 'Town Traders Association' (*Nagarika Velenda Sangamiya*), 'Our Dambulla' (*Apē Dambulla*), the 'Dambulla Town Welfare Society (*Dambulla Nagarika Subhasādhika Samitiya*), the town's three wheeler union, and various other small community welfare societies.

One of the only traders' unions with which Sumangala does not have leverage, and coincidentally the most powerful union in Dambulla, is the Dambulla Dedicated Economic Centre Traders' Union (*Dambulla Vishashita Artka Madyastaani Velenda Sangamiya*), which operates under the control of the local minister. This union includes members of the Mosque Committee. This was formed in 1997 when the Dambulla Dedicated Economic Centre (henceforth DDEC) was constructed under the auspices of the minister. Before the DDEC, the Dambulla vegetable merchants, known as *mudalalis*, controlled the sale of vegetables through commission stalls operating from the junction in the town centre. The *mudalalis* managed the process of exchange through lines of credit to farmers to grow the produce, and advances to buyers who came and took the vegetables away to sell on elsewhere. When the minister moved the traders into the DDEC, the DDEC traders' union became the biggest single union in Dambulla and caused two other unions to fall apart due to lack of members. Sumangala himself sponsored one of these failed unions.

License to trade in the DDEC, and thus entry to the influential DDEC traders' union, is authorised by the local minister. The local minister, whose father was the minister before him, and whose son is set to be the minister after him, has for a long time been at loggerheads with Sumangala. By controlling the licenses required by the vendors in the market, the minister could issue out stalls to his supporters, who must in turn offer their support to the minister when required.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the minister harnessed the commercial activities in the town and built a fairly robust system of patronage among the towns merchants. Furthermore, the way in which the vegetable traders control the exchange of agricultural produce through the DDEC, has resulted in a situation whereby the farmers have become increasingly dependent on relations of patronage with the Dambulla vegetable merchants.

Through the formation of the DDEC the local minister has harnessed the power of the wealthy merchants in the town. Not only do the relations of exchange in the DDEC make farmers increasingly dependent on merchants for the sale of their vegetables, the Dambulla merchants have also become an increasingly important point of contact for local level politicking as well as a line of access to politicians themselves. The increasing dependence on merchants in everyday politicking not only poses a threat to Sumangala's channels of patronage in Dambulla, but places them instead in the sphere of influence of the local minister, with whom he has been in a longstanding confrontation.

Five months prior to the Dambulla mosque protest the vegetable traders had organised a protest of their own which resulted in fights with the police, closing down roads, and the accidental tear-gassing of a hospital. In this instance, as with the mosque, the army was called upon to intervene. Although this event didn't garner as much public comment as the mosque attack, it was a much larger and much more violent affair and put Dambulla squarely in the media spotlight. Furthermore, as a public spectacle, it emphasised and enforced allegiances and hierarchies at a local level, in much the same way Sumangala's protest against the mosque would. Following the impressive (and ultimately successful) protest led by the merchants, Sumangala's public performance of authority at the mosque could be seen as a strategic maneuver to reaffirm his position in the local power structure at a time when he is estranged from the local minister and the Dambulla merchants are becoming increasingly influential figures in local politicking. At another level, the attack on the mosque could be seen

as the exploitation of a ‘political opportunity’ (see, Bedi 2013:45; Meyer & Staggenborg 1996) by creating such a spectacle, Sumangala prompted the government to prove they were either as dedicated to post-war cohabitation as they had publicly professed to be, or, that they were committed to the nationalist rhetoric of Sinhala-Buddhist primacy they also promulgate and on which their political support base rests.

## CONCLUSION

It is tempting to conclude with the suggestion that the attack on the Dambulla mosque was born out of a relatively localised set of disputes between the minister and the chief priest of the Dambulla temple, and thus had very little to do with Muslims, mosques and ‘sacred areas’. Whilst this is certainly one view from Dambulla that offers a partial explanation as to why the mosque was attacked, it does not fully acknowledge the visceral and antagonistic nature of identity politics in Sri Lanka. Whilst there may well be local and national-level politicking at play, there was simultaneously a very real sense of antipathy towards Muslims noticeable on the day of the protest.<sup>22</sup> However, this paper has not sought to explore the causes of the event itself. Rather than ask, what made the attack on the mosque possible, this paper has explored what the attack on the Dambulla mosque *makes* possible? What is significant about the way in which the protest was carried out and the way it was framed by those at the centre of it? And what does such a protest tell us about politics and religion in Sri Lanka in 2012? To address these questions, rather than look at the causes of a local protest, a large part of the paper was dedicated to a description of the day itself. In doing so, the paper has shown how the performance of purification and the conservation of what is deemed to be ‘sacred’ in Sri Lanka, provides an effective idiom through which religious figures such as Sumangala can intelligibly articulate political claims whilst maintaining critical distance from the dirty world of ‘Politics’. It has additionally sought to contextualise the various different meanings of politics in Dambulla: highlighting the interplay of everyday politicking, high profile political performance, and in particular, the importance of denying to be doing anything ‘political’ at all.

In conclusion, I wish to return briefly to the confrontation that played out next to the kovil in Pādeniya. The quarrel between the protestor and the Sinhalese Pādeniya resident revealed the politics of ethno-religious separation central to Sumangala’s project of demarcating a ‘sacred’ area. But more importantly perhaps, the quarrel illustrates how the messy reality of life, notably the ways in which the residents of Pādeniya are inextricably entwined in Dambulla’s social fabric, undermines such projects of separation and purification along ethnic and religious lines. The task of purifying space, as pointed out by Goodhand *et al* (2009) and elsewhere by Hasbullah and Korf (2009), requires enforcing improbable boundaries and creating an - evidently - impossible order. Rhetoric of ‘national purity’ appeared in Sri Lankan public life in the early 1930s with the emergence of mass electoral politics and the ‘impossible work of purification’ (Spencer 2003) - organising the modern nation state into an ethnically, religiously and culturally homogenous entity - has been undertaken by elite politicians throughout the twentieth century.

Central to Sumangala's protest is the *public performance* of political rhetoric about national purity. The degree to which Sumangala genuinely believes in the inflammatory anti-muslim speeches he makes or the degree to which purifying sacred ground is important to him is unknown; there may well be an elective affinity at work between the two. However, what Sumangala recognizes better than many, is the effectiveness of publicly performing such beliefs against the potent political backdrop of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. 'Purity', may in reality be a near impossible order, but a certain public gesture to achieve it, such as Sumangala's protest, produces an effect that demands a response from the world of politics. By framing his activities in terms of protecting a 'sacred area', concerning himself only with the 'spiritual development' of the town as part of his 'religious responsibility', Sumangala appears to transcend/transgress the disunity associated with party politics, to speak from beyond 'the political', yet remain simultaneously engaged in both national-level politics and local-level politicking. What I have also suggested here is that although Sumangala invokes ethno-nationalist registers, which have much currency on the national stage, he does so in part for the 'small-p politics' of the local.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Bodu Bala Senā* (Buddhist Strength Force), appear to have come forward as the primary instigator of the recently organised demonstrations against Muslims. However, the protest against Halal food in Kuliyaipitiya at the end of January was claimed to be organised by a right wing Sinhala Buddhist group calling themselves Hela Sihala Hiru (Party of the Sinhala Sun). On the day of the protest against the Dambulla mosque a group called Sinhala Ravaya (Roar of the Sinhalese) were present and said to have caused much of the aggravation.

<sup>2</sup> Premakumara De Silva has produced a short but useful overview of some of the transformations that have taken place in the anthropology of 'Sinhala Buddhism' (see De Silva 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The Golden Temple handles the administration of the Dambulla Cave Temple. For simplicity I will refer to the Dambulla Temple throughout to encompass both, as both are under the charge of Sumangala.

<sup>4</sup> The 'Rangiri Sri Lanka Media Network', although situated in the compound with the Cave Temple and the Golden Temple is a separate enterprise run by the 'Rangiri Dambulla Development Foundation, registered under the Government Company's Act, also owned by Sumangala.

<sup>5</sup> Sumangala also told the crowd that Muslims are 'an inhumane/animal-like race of people who can cut the neck of a living cow' (*Harakgay bella amu-amuweng cappanna pouluwan thirisangjathiyak may*).

<sup>6</sup> The attack on the Dambulla mosque occurred, ten days before the 2012 May Day rally, which had, rather unfortunately given the circumstances, been organised around the theme of coexistence, and named, 'Rata Ekata - One Country'.

<sup>7</sup> This is the history of the mosque in Dambulla as told to me by a member of the trustee board of the Dambulla Mosque Committee. A Muslim trader in the Dambulla vegetable market apparently holds the title deed to the land.

<sup>8</sup> The Divisional Secretary turned up basically just to say that she had no idea that this was happening and is just now learning about the event.

<sup>9</sup> 'Topi mehing palayang'. Topi' is a very impolite version of you, 'mehing palayang' translates as, get out of here. Both 'mehing palayang' and its opposite, 'wara meharta' – get here, are aggressive terms of address. 'mehing palayang' and 'wara meharta' are also occasionally used in the home by the mother referring to her son, usually when he is in trouble. They are commands and used only on a person who is considered to be of 'lower' status (class, age, gender) than oneself even if it is said in affection, or in a context where there is affection – like the mother to the son. The word that makes Sumangala's address to the woman in Pādeniya particularly aggressive is the second person pronoun 'topi'.

<sup>10</sup> Women in particular have been subject to subtle and obvious forms of harassment and control throughout the ethno-nationalist project in Sri Lanka. Much of this has been superbly documented by scholars such as Jayawardena (1992), De Mel (2001), de Alwis (1996, 2004), Hewamanne (2008),

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Lynch (2007), Ruwanpura K (2008), and Ruwanpura E (2011). In much of this work female morality presents a site to be regulated. Women displaced in the conflict, or engaged in daily wage labour and labour migration - such as the women in Pādeniya – are associated with impurity and present a moral peril in the Sinhala-Buddhist national imaginary. For more on this see in particular Jayawardena (1992) and de Alwis (2004).

<sup>11</sup> This particular ritual has seen a recent resurgence in the North of Sri Lanka, see Derges (2009, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Perahera is a term for a ritual procession, which is usually associated with Buddhism. It normally involves a pageant of elephants, fire dancers, and Kandyan dancers parading through the streets.

<sup>13</sup> Sādu is another word for a Monk, but 'Sādu-Sādu-Sādu', as was repeatedly shouted out on the day of the protest is a chant of worship to what is referred to as the 'triple gem': the Lord Buddha, the Dhamma (Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (the Monastic community).

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.sundaytimes.lk/120429/News/nws\\_35.html](http://www.sundaytimes.lk/120429/News/nws_35.html) Accessed on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>15</sup> The Ministry of Urban Development is under the Ministry of Defence, which is headed by the President's brother.

<sup>16</sup> People closed their shops to protest the closure of the mosque in Kalmunai, Samanthurai, Akkaraipattu, and Saindamaradu areas in the Ampara district. This happened on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April. Also on this day the Katankady Mosque federation was set on fire.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/mosque-set-on-fire-in-kattankudy/> Accessed on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013

<sup>18</sup> This process has been well documented in Elizabeth Nissan's doctoral thesis, 'History in the Making: Anurādhapura and the Sinhala Buddhist Nation' (1989).

<sup>19</sup> The most salient example is the Maruthamunai Mosque Federation's involvement in humanitarian aid distribution and conflict resolution.

<sup>20</sup> For the most detailed analysis of this protest see, H.L. Seneviratne (1999) Chp. 5. Also see A. Abeysekara (2002), Uyangoda (1992) (Uyangoda's article is published in Sinhala and English. The article used by Senivaratne in his analysis of the Kandalama debates was published in Sinhala in *Pravada* 2. (July-August) 7-9).

<sup>21</sup> There were more stalls in the newly constructed DDEC than had previously been operating at the roadside, so for the most part those who were trading at the junction automatically got a stall in the DDEC and it was the additional stalls that were given to party supporters.

<sup>22</sup> It has not been the aim of the paper to unpack the antipathy felt towards Muslims in Sri Lanka, indeed my own ethnographic data from Dambulla would not enable such a discussion. I would instead direct the reader to the valuable scholarly work of Farzana Haniffa.

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